

*The Bibliophile
of the Future*

by JACQUES BARZUN





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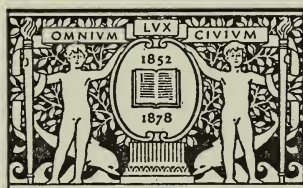
*The Bibliophile of the Future:
His Complaints about
the Twentieth Century*

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by JACQUES BARZUN

Delivered on the occasion of the
fourth annual Bromsen Lecture

May 1, 1976



BOSTON

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1976

2992 . B33

Acc. 2001-9

Maury A. Bromsen Lecture
in Humanistic Bibliography, No. 4

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Barzun, Jacques, 1907—

The bibliophile of the future, his complaints about the
twentieth century.

(Maury A. Bromsen lecture in humanistic bibliography; no. 4)

1. Books—Addresses, essays, lectures. 2. Book collecting—
Addresses, essays, lectures. I. Title. II. Series.

Z992.B33 O20'.75 76-46290

ISBN 0-89073-048-2

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Foreword

The Boston Public Library is pleased to present in book form the fourth annual Maury A. Bromsen Lecture in Humanistic Bibliography.

The 1975 lecture looked to the past, dealing with the nineteenth century, so it was most appropriate in Boston's second year of bicentennial celebration that Dr. Jacques Barzun treat "The Bibliophile of the Future: His Complaints about the Twentieth Century."

Dr. Barzun has had a distinguished career as educator and administrator at Columbia University, where he served as dean of faculties and provost, 1958-1967, and as University Professor and Special Advisor on Arts from 1968 until his retirement in 1975. He now serves as literary advisor to Charles Scribner's Sons. As author, lecturer, and teacher, Mr. Barzun has made major contributions to education, literature, and the appreciation of the Arts. Numbered among his significant publications are *Teacher in America*, *The House of Intellect*, *The*

American University, Berlioz and the Romantic Century, The Use and Abuse of Art, and Of Human Freedom. We are pleased to add this lecture to the list of his writings.

PHILIP J. McNIFF

DIRECTOR AND LIBRARIAN

The Bibliophile of the Future: His Complaints about the Twentieth Century

THOUGH I greatly value the honor of delivering before this assembly of experts and collectors the Bromsen Lecture in Humanistic Bibliography, I confess to a certain disquiet at being here somewhat on false pretenses: I am not a bibliographer and I am not a collector. What then can I tell you about books that you do not already know? That question is the reason why I venture to speak to you as if I were a bibliophile of the *next* century. I shall not try to guess the manner of his complaints, but their substance I think I can furnish in my capacity of ordinary reader, who depends on books for pleasure and instruction, both.

When I say I am not a collector, I mean in the honorific sense. I buy books on the subjects of my interest, but these turn out to be so many and so diverse that I could not hope to attain that degree of completeness in any one field which

constitutes a collection. Nor do I care particularly about first editions. For my work, later editions are generally preferable. If I possess any unusual or rare items in any quantity, it is reference books, which have for me enormous appeal, not only for their practical use, but as samples of a type of thought characteristic of ripe civilizations—overripe, perhaps—when guides and lists and extracts seem more necessary than the works themselves.

This fact brings me to the very centre of my discourse. Charles Lamb, as you all know, detested reference books. He called them *biblia a-biblia*—non-books, books in form only, because they usurped the name and appearance of the real books that he wanted, books to read, the old folios and quartos that he loved and that in his enthusiasm he would kiss. It is from those books, of course, that he drew his *Specimens of the English Dramatic Poets Contemporary With Shakespeare*, a work which changed the whole modern view of English literature, including our estimate of Shakespeare, by restoring to favor and interest a great period of English dramatic poetry.

Now, why was it possible for a little clerk of genius in India House to effect this change—without a Rockefeller grant, without a nationwide library system and a union list of titles? It was possible because the books were lying around, in bookshops and people's houses—unread, perhaps, but there, in the library or the attic.

Earlier, much the same thing happened when Dryden, in an age of neoclassicism based on French models, revived—or at least made the first try at reviving—the fame and works of

Chaucer. Dryden's patron, the Earl of Leicester, loved Chaucer and had acquired the early and late printings of the poet, so that in my lord's library Dryden read and admired, later making paraphrases which he published and introduced to a public that understood Latin, French, and Italian far more easily than 14th century English.

The point of these two revivals by Dryden and Lamb is this: they found and were using books long neglected, books universally believed to be of no value, which nevertheless had remained physically in being for three hundred years. In contrast, if men comparable to Lamb and Dryden exist *one* hundred years from now, their complaint will be that the 20th century made its own judgment of what was good and great and left future judges no chance to modify, supplement, or reverse the verdicts. Why no chance? Because the neglected or forgotten books will not be there: they will have physically turned to dust and ashes. They will exist only as a form of air pollution.

Before I turn to a few striking examples of what I have in mind, let me persuade you of an important truth, which is easy to understand and believe, but difficult to feel deep down in oneself: it is that culture periodically makes sharp turns, or swings, by which what has looked permanently great and valuable suddenly becomes worthless and foolish. What was art or genius is despised, and something overlooked or condemned takes its place. For instance, among literary people in England and America today you will not find a handful of good judges who think much of Tennyson or Shelley. This same majority would rather bow its head before

John Donne and Gerard Manly Hopkins. And no permanence need be expected of that preferred choice either. What has been aptly called the whirligig of taste brings in his revenges when circumstances change again, mysteriously; at which time some inquisitive or rebellious mind—a Lamb or a Dryden—undertakes to prove the merit of the new-old. And for this purpose, the books must be there, lying around, in readable shape.

We may now return to the present state of affairs, about which I promised to give examples. We have millions of books, thousands of libraries, great catalogues, computers behind the scenes—all of it geared to speed knowledge—or more exactly, to facilitate research. But what we lack is reasonable longevity in books. We keep books in print as long as we happen to like them. They exist in paperback as long as ten to twenty thousand people buy them each year. But let the demand drop to nineteen or nine thousand and out goes the title. There is no use quarreling with economic facts, though it may be said in passing that the so-called marketing of books is an insane arrangement virtually designed to prevent wide distribution.

But even if we had much larger sales of important books, which would theoretically help the survival of single copies, that happy result would not occur, because the books we manufacture do not survive. They do not lie around for three hundred years; they disintegrate in thirty. My complete set of Bernard Shaw, the Constable edition of 1933, is already yellowing at the edges and cracking at the hinge. It is no use saying that Shaw's best plays will continue to be acted and

therefore printed and read. No such thing is guaranteed in the first place; and in the second place, the reissue of a dozen plays will not prevent the loss of the vast store of essays, music and drama criticism, political speeches and social commentary of one of the greatest writers of English prose. Next to Shaw, I have Sir Walter Scott's edition of the complete works of Swift: it is in almost as good condition as when it came off the press in 1814.

Anyone who uses for research a library he knows well has had the experience of discovering one day that some volume previously used—single or part of a set—has gone forever; the shelf space is empty, the card removed from the index. Sometimes the explanation is that it has been stolen; more often it has died. The librarian has thrown it out as unusable and would be wearing a black band around his arm if such a demise did not happen so often. One of the great English historians, F. W. Maitland, was memorialized after his death by the publication in 1911 of his *Collected Papers* in six volumes. By now, the pages of those volumes cannot be turned without splitting in large fragments, like peanut brittle. In two libraries where I have used the set it is now a mere memory of the users. The same is true of the remarkable lectures and papers that were delivered at St. Louis in 1904, when the learned men of the world in all branches of science and thought were gathered to celebrate the centenary of the Louisiana Purchase. The eight volumes, published in Boston by 1908, are fast becoming what a librarian vividly termed "a mass of printed dandruff." I took the trouble to have one or two volumes of the set I own laminated, but that is only a

temporary expedient. Nor can I imagine a future collector boasting to a friend: "I'd like you to see my wonderful laminated *St. Louis Congress*, Volume 2."

The paradoxes of our relation to books do not stop with this grievous state of affairs. We thought it was progress to make books cheap by using bad paper. But now books are no longer cheap, *except* in paper. We thought it was progress to publish more and more books—now thirty-six thousand a year, or a hundred a day—but we now see that the more are published, the smaller the variety of those that reach an audience. All who read tend to read the same books and never hear of the rest. Who will correct the narrowness of this lemming-like readership if the neglected works physically perish? Librarians do their best, but they must give what readers want. This means multiple copies of merely current books. The library walls bulge out as a new wave of best-sellers—fiction or topical works—demands its space among the rest.

This glut introduces a second principle of destruction. It is easy enough to get rid of duplicates; it is harder to know what else to discard. The rule of thumb—get rid of what people do not ask for, hence do not want—seems democratic until one thinks back to Dryden and Lamb. "Want" is an ambiguous word: want now? Want later? And who is it, or will it be, that wants? The future bibliophile may care not at all about—let me use imaginary titles to avoid offense—he may not care to read *Flushing Out Watergate* or *I Killed Sixteen for No Reason*; his perspective will have changed, and we shall have denied him some fine or great books that would have met his elevated needs.

Do not, please, misconstrue this supposition as being the usual complaint that good books are sacrificed to bad ones, the good being assumed to consist only of learned works and deep thought. I believe on the contrary that excellence is to be found in all genres, including those that entertain. So much so, that I have lately been engaged in bringing back into circulation *Fifty Classics of Crime Fiction*, carefully chosen and furnished with prefaces showing why they are classics. They will be printed on 250-year paper, which is guaranteed to last forever or for 250 years, whichever is longer. But, of course, as in all modern reprint schemes, the fifty works will be issued once for all in an edition of five hundred copies. That will not reach very far, though it will preserve for a future Charles Lamb several stories of which, to the best of my knowledge, I have at this moment the only copy extant, having either bought it when it appeared in the 1920's or rescued it a few months ago, when my local library tossed it out as a discard.

The example of detective fiction is convenient, because it naturally suggests the opposite kind of book, which would not entertain even if it could—the so-called scholarly work, which only a university press will publish; or again the scarce historic volume or set that reprint houses hope to sell in editions of a few hundred copies, like my *Fifty Classics of Crime*. Much gets reprinted in this fashion—that is unquestionable, but it is usually the well-known works; there is little interest in discoveries. And the mode of republication is in many ways rough, both in physical detail and in bibliographic care. At the present time, it is almost impossible to

trace a book published, say, thirty years ago, and assign to the subsequent reissues the correct publishers and dates, to say nothing of finding where a copy may still be bought. For all our boasts of method, we are back with the Irish and Dutch pirates of the 17th and 18th century books. This confusion, I am afraid, is also overtaking our cataloguing systems, but that is another topic, which it would not be tactful to broach here.

Let me return to the products of scholarship, bred mostly in universities and hatched by their presses. As to such books there is a rather complacent feeling among those who bring them out. Nothing about them is cheap. They are on relatively good paper, the binding is solid, and the general make-up visibly designed to repel frequent handling. Under the pressure of the Ph.D. requirement, many such books are published, they are the sort that librarians would retain even if they had to throw out the works of A. P. Herbert and the harangues of Mr. Dooley.

That, to me, is just the trouble. Not that I object to young scholars earning promotion by getting the dissertation printed. The poor boys and girls cannot help themselves. But their situation and the character of the books they spawn compel one to think about the way our society lays out the money that it can spare for intellectual purposes—in this instance, for books. That allocation naturally corresponds to our habits of thought about scholarship and intellect, and those habits seem to me inimical to culture. To begin with, such habits will not produce books for a future Charles Lamb to cherish, but that is only one objection to what we do. What we have

done and are doing in humanistic scholarship is to encourage blind proliferation. This is most easily seen in the evergrowing number of learned periodicals. They and the books called scholarly are taken as signs of a knowledge explosion. It is only a knowledge inflation. The knowledge which should go into a footnote of six lines is made into an article of twelve pages; and that which should go into an article of twelve pages goes into a book of three hundred.

I need not add that there are notable exceptions to this generality. Modern scholarship is not all beaten-up white of egg. But—you may ask—how can anyone say what I have just said: it is mere opinion. It is opinion, of course, but not mere. Anybody who wants to verify the charge has only to pick up an article of the sort I have mentioned and find in it the one new point. He will see that it occupies a few sentences, while the rest are devoted to repeating at length the surrounding circumstances, which everybody knew. The same principle applies still more extensively to the innumerable “studies,” in which the “real meaning” of *Moby Dick* or the “hidden themes” in *Paradise Lost* are demonstrated at long last. It would be interesting to compute how many times each year the great English novels and poems are thus reprinted in bits and pieces for this kind of exercise.

The reason periodicals multiply endlessly, at enormous social cost and to the dismay of librarians, who see more and more of these finite products extending themselves to infinity, is in part the same need to show off a piece of research in inflated form. But equally influential is the false analogy with physical science, in which important work always ap-

pears in articles—there is no time for books and even great discoveries can fit in a few pages. These different conditions do not prevent scientific journals from also publishing the dull rehash of what is known. Talk to a first-rate physicist or medical researcher and he will express only contempt for most of what he finds in the literature of his field.

It may seem to you that I have strayed from my concern with books, with *the book* as a carrier of knowledge, culture, pleasure, and tradition. But I believe I have not lost sight of it in showing you that today money and effort and space tend to be lavished on *biblia a-biblia*, on Charles Lamb's non-books. Periodicals will push out books regardless of intrinsic value, because latest is believed to be best; so-called scholarly books will outlive trade books because less cheaply put together; and trade books themselves will more and more likely prove to be compilations of news reports, or of interviews and questionnaires, quickly put together to take advantage of a current scandal or predicament. For this is the way to persuade a publisher that he will make sales large enough to recover his costs. The evidence for this tendency appears in the columns of our book reviewers, who unconsciously follow both production and public demand. Daily you are informed of the latest work that tells you how to avoid rape, income tax, or foods dangerously colored, and on the positive side (I quote the most urgent) how to "share your wife's pregnancy." Novels are reviewed also, and occasionally a work of history or philosophy but only if its power to startle or depress is clear from the jacket.

Again, please do not misconstrue my remarks: I raise no

objection to pleasing the crowd, if that is what is being done—nor do I regret the existence of the crowd itself. There is nothing wrong with the market as a device for sorting out books or ideas. I am only concerned that the failures in that struggle, the failures as measured by this helter-skelter operation, should be able to survive—not because they are failures, but because some of them may be wanted later, to please another market, a different crowd; wanted to fill the gap left by great successes that have lost their glamour, and to take their place alongside those that have not.

Within my lifetime I have seen the revival of interest in Melville, Dickens, Henry James, and most lately Trollope, each of whom had been either ignored or despised. The rediscovery of Melville was accomplished by one of my teachers, Raymond Weaver, who in 1920 published the critical study that shed the new light: *Herman Melville, Mariner and Mystic*. Professor Weaver obviously had to be able to find Melville's books before he could reassess them. With the Henry James revival, I had something to do. My own interest was inspired in part by accident. During the depression one was able to buy at secondhand shops odd volumes of the handsome New York Edition of Henry James for fifty cents; one I remember getting in mint condition for twenty-nine cents—which shows how popular James was in the fifteen years after his death.

Such revivals are incompatible with the use of esparto grass. I am not referring to an insidious drug, but using a metaphor based on the ingredient that first made paper excessively vulnerable to time. Not even the treatment by soda

water and milk of magnesia, which was developed across the way at the Athenæum by Mr. Cunha and which is popularly known as "Cunha's cocktail," will forestall the losses that I deprecate, for their importance can be measured only when by good luck they do not happen. Take for example two American writers who achieved no great renown in their day but whom some readers (I among them) consider important—the critic of literature and society John Jay Chapman and the delicate novelist Anne Goodwin Winslow. Supposing one has even heard of them, where does one go to see if after all they do deserve notice? Well, until a few years ago most libraries owned only two—the same two—of Chapman's books; I got the rest from members of his family, who were surprised, like all writers' families, that anyone should want them. I made an anthology, which in turn led to a complete reprinting, but unfortunately in poor form and very expensive. As for Mrs. Winslow's novels—the three that I know—I came upon them by chance and have not yet succeeded in finding the rest. She died only a dozen years ago, but her publisher has none of her books in the firm library. They must have been stolen by secret admirers.

If, as I believe, these indications imply something radically wrong with our very idea of what a book is—whether "we" denotes the common reader, the publisher, the book reviewer, or the librarian—then what, if anything, can be done? The economics of publishing cannot be changed very much; and that being so, the choices made by the publisher, book reviewer, and common reader will not greatly change either. But the smaller and presumably better informed part

of the bookish world—the scholar, librarian, educated reader, and bibliophile—*can* effect a change, if they will set about it—a change, to begin with, in their idea of what a book is, what a living culture consists of, and, most important, what leadership by example can do.

I hope to have shown you what I think a book is by drawing your attention to the cycles of neglect and rediscovery, and I have tried to make clear by examples from scholarship and journalism what a book is not. If we can keep alive a strong conviction that these are true differences, fundamental differences, the state of things out there in the real world will change. Then anyone who holds a place as bibliophile, librarian, critic, or teacher can help maintain that change by making judgments and choices different from the conventional ones. The mind will not run in the old groove, saying “a periodical is worth more than a book because it keeps knowledge up to date.” There will be no automatic sniff at Dorothy Sayers’ *Strong Poison*. (One should never sniff at poison.) Finally, the notion of an authoritative, everlasting consensus about books will be regarded skeptically and be subject to review by an independent judgment, the judgment that asks: is this *really* a book, a true Lamb of a book, or is it a wolf in sheep’s clothing? Action will then follow in keeping with the decision, no matter how solemnly old professional habits dictate the opposite.

But success calls for strong faith and persistence. Over forty years ago, a colleague and I drew up a plan by which his department, which was English and Comparative Literature, and mine, which was History would encourage Ph.D.

candidates to offer as their dissertation the edition of an important work that was out of print, or in print but in need of editing. The plan was coupled with a proposal to the university press for the publication of these books, some possibly in paperback for class use. We were turned down, of course, on all sides, with indulgent smiles at our youthful idiocy. And being young, we gave up. We should have kept at it. The press came to favor the idea, but by then my colleague had retired, and I, being chief academic officer of the university, had no right to entertain or push ideas for academic use.

The present plight of graduate study gives universities and their presses a renewed chance to think about what they are doing. For all great questions ultimately come down to an economic choice, in the strict sense of economic, which is: prudent for the household. That choice is often expressed in money, but not always, as may be seen in the librarian's allocation of space or discarding of books. All such decisions, at any rate, show where our heart lies or where our mind went wrong. No clearer sign of this truth can be found than the expenditure of money, effort, and time that has latterly taken place in the attempt to make the book obsolete by machinery, beginning with the camera that makes microfilm and ending with the computer, which is to provide us with knowledge equal to Dr. Faust's at the touch of a finger on a keyboard.

In some of the circles I frequent, people who profess devotion to books express only one regret when this mechanization is mentioned—that it is terribly expensive. In other places, one hears only that it is inhuman and will destroy

poetry, philosophy, and the good life. Both groups apparently find it difficult to make distinctions, to fix upon an economic choice.

Yet it is clear that if all or most of our money henceforth goes into substitutes for books, the peculiar virtues of books will disappear, or at least be greatly dimmed. For there is no such thing in the entire universe as a complete, perfect substitute for anything. Some quality is always lost in exchange for the gain. It is a pity to forget this economic rule. I well remember the excitement at the birth of microfilm. It would make books and magazines merely incidental to learning and library use. Microfilm took up very little room and it would last two hundred years—almost as long as the First Folio of Shakespeare. But soon we heard that our darling had developed measles—black spots all over the film—and that even if it stayed clear, the strip would last only forty years: Methuselah brought down to the span of Edgar Allan Poe.

A microfilm is nonetheless an admirable and useful thing. It is easy to store and ship; it communicates manuscripts, which never ought to travel; it is ideal for distributing dissertations, and it would in fact replace the printing of much of our garrulous scholarship. Lastly, it preserves the contents of newspapers, which perish like butterflies and which are difficult to house. None of this means that microfilm can perform the office of a book. One cannot riffle through it or even skim intelligently, let alone browse. The important backward and forward comparisons of the attentive reader are impossible, and the use of the index is unbearably tedious. Worst of all, it shuts out serendipity. No one has gazed at a

shelf piled with microfilm boxes and been tempted to take one down at random to see what it said. In spite of these obvious truths, one used to hear of libraries that planned to store all their books in a warehouse in the desert, where rent was low, and offer the city user only the "standard" microfilms. Special demands would be met by making a microfilm from the original in the desert. That utopia vanished. In its place, the truth was gradually established that readers consult microfilm only under necessity. They still want to own books and mark the margins or make a private index on the flyleaf.

Much the same thing can be said about microfiche, though it has the advantage of being a small card, easier to handle than the roll of film, and able to carry more pages on its surface. I think it a great pity that the *Encyclopedia Britannica* project of supplying vast collections of works, grouped by subjects on sets of fifteen thousand cards, found no response. These sets would have provided excellent working libraries for small colleges that could never afford to buy one-tenth of the number of books, some of them, indeed, unobtainable at any price. The great obstacle to success seemed to be the difficulty of reading five hundred pages on a 4 x 6 card, even when magnified. There is something about a book which fits the eye, the hand—and the mind: it has achieved perfect form, which cannot be transcended.

What are we to say of the computer and its attachments as a device for nourishing that mind? The value of the computer is not in doubt for classifying, indexing, correlating bits of information. "Medlars" and "Lexis" are systems that help

the medical and the legal researcher to find articles or cases, provided certain key words are hit upon, and provided one sorts out from the report the irrelevant items that the key-words bring up. For example, I recently wanted to know how many articles had appeared in the medical journals during the last five years that bore on the quality of technical writing. I received a printout with some 225 titles and their full reference. But about 90 of these had nothing to do with the stated subject. One of the 90 was: "Homosexuality in the Philippines and the United States—the Handwriting on the Wall."

To any one who reflects a moment, it is obvious that data banks, however much their performance is refined, can never embody knowledge—only information. The very word "retrieval," which is used to describe the act of resorting to such a device, indicates that what we get from it is the fragment that a technician has lodged there after making an abstract from a book or a list. This retrieval is utterly unlike what we do with a book when we use it to read and not just to verify a date. I spoke of nourishing the mind and the image embodies this same point. It is immeasurably reinforced if one thinks of the role of books in *awakening* the mind, particularly of the young.

The upshot of these considerations is that if we want to avoid the contempt and hatred of future bibliophiles—future thinkers or future archeologists—we must spend our cultural money with far greater wisdom and prudence than we have shown for the last hundred years. We must resist all bandwagon emotions, the kind that propel us into quick infatua-

tion with microfilm or computers, and then just as quickly out of it into love of some other all-purpose gimmickry. Each device has merit in its place; none makes the best devices of the past obsolete.

In what comes out of that past itself, habits and routines must be periodically reexamined. Because a piece of writing is called "scholarship" or "learned journal" and can be seen from ten feet away to possess footnotes, there is no warrant to give the one the dignity of book publication and the other the space of a hundred books. Each must be judged for what it offers to culture. Without this direct judgment, administration is only faddishness and irresponsibility.

If publication seems deserved, then let it fit the case: good materials and decent care. The second really costs little, but it has to be enforced by insistence. Advanced technology too often gives us gray print on a gray page. But I have been involved in enough publishing projects to know that if you start demanding that things be done right, the entire firm pretty soon is ahead of you in being perfectionist. I am told by a colleague that there is now no edition of Gibbon on the market that is not full of textual errors and incoherent punctuation. One conscientious man on some past occasion of republishing could have averted who knows how many repetitions of these errors. All of us underestimate our power to deflect the heedless course of things. We are made weak by looking at what the other fellow is doing, not aware that this very instinct to conform may be turned to advantage: by acting out one's sharper judgment one may start a series of imitations along a better path, after which one can write a

book urging the new departure. But if one does, one must remember that it is a book only in shape; it is in reality one of Lamb's non-books, justified solely by what it may do in the service of the other kind, the kind that should be lying around in readable shape for long periods, the kind of book that Lamb, if he came upon it, would feel impelled to kiss.



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